
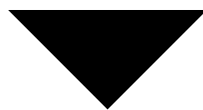


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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Black Africa's Urban Problems

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**30 December 1971
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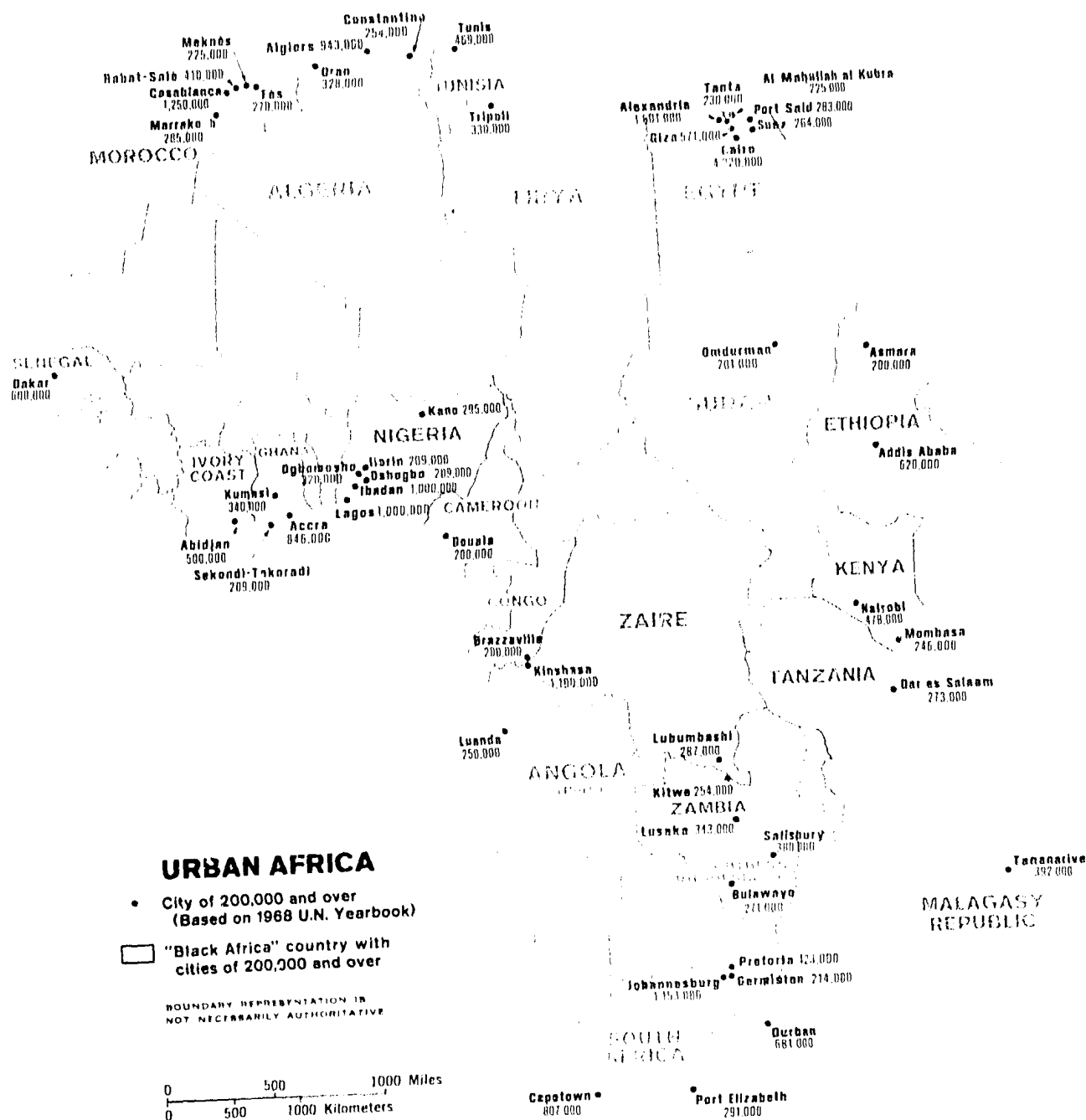
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*Shacks Without Numbers,
Streets Without Names*



BLACK AFRICA'S URBAN PROBLEMS



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**Shacks Without Numbers,
Streets Without Names**

**BLACK AFRICA'S
URBAN PROBLEMS**

Urbanization and attendant problems have come to Black Africa, even though the picture of Africa as the least urbanized continent still holds. Only one in ten live in cities there compared with one in five world-wide. In 1968, there were 50 cities in Africa with more than 200,000 inhabitants. Nearly half of these are in a dozen Black African countries where they bring intense but only scarcely recognized problems.

In the atmosphere of post-liberation years, the population of these Black African cities has been growing with exceptional rapidity. Over the last decade, the urban population increased eight or more times. In the rest of Africa, urban populations were rising during the same period by only two or three times. Birth rates alone do not account for this. Natural population growth in Africa's countryside is at least as high as in the cities. Migration from rural areas is the source of the dramatic increase in city dwellers. In the early stages, this migration consisted mainly of young men who came for relatively short stays. Later, the proportion of women increased, and more of the migrants became permanent city dwellers.

They came because of both rural "push" and urban "pull." In practice, it is all but impossible to disentangle the two. Almost everyone who migrates to the city does so because he believes that economic opportunity is greater there than in the countryside and that the city offers more fun, freedom, status, civilization, health, and education. But, despite the magnetism, African cities confer these benefits on only a few of the many who come.

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Most of the big cities in Black Africa were founded by Europeans during the colonial era. As such, they naturally were extensions of European society rather than an outgrowth of the local environment. The Europeans—in the absence of a local urban tradition—imposed their own forms and ways of doing things and built cities to serve their own needs. Not surprisingly then, these cities are for the most part ports and mining towns. Little thought was given to the African population, which was left to fend for itself. The result is that a Black African city typically has only a few areas resembling modern Western cities in physical aspect and amenities. These are the main business district and the suburban residen-

tial areas where the elite—European and African—lives and works.

The rest of the city is a hodgepodge of tangled lanes and shacks where the Africans, many recently arrived from rural areas, live all too frequently in something close to squalor. There is little modern transportation, and many areas do not even have streets. Running water and electricity are rare.

The major exceptions to the rule of European-built cities are Nigeria's indigenous Yoruba cities. Although population densities exceed those of some of the largest cities in the US, such as Chicago, these cities are on the whole better



Urban squatters in Nairobi

Opposite:

Carter Bridge in Lagos: Obviously not built with its African users in mind

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adapted to African needs. Nevertheless, they too suffer from growth pains.

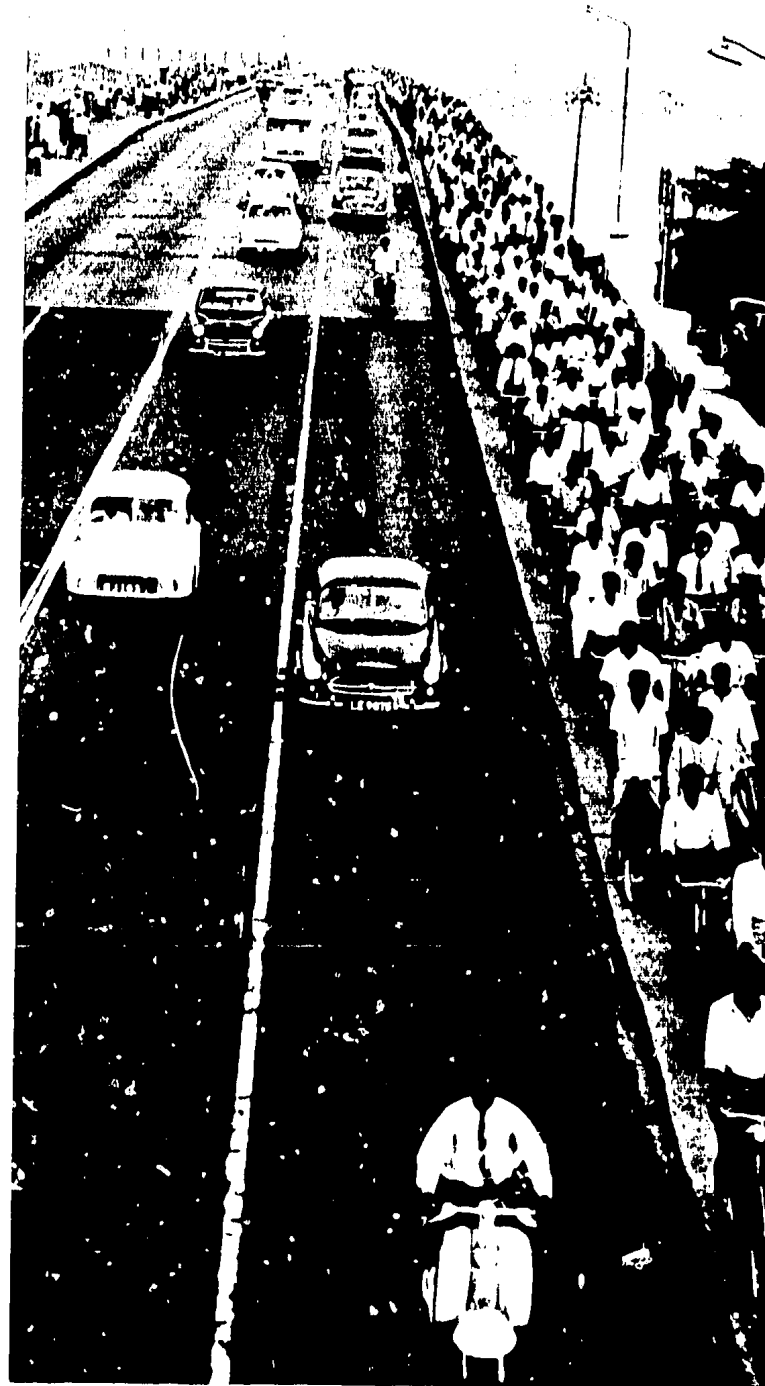
In any case, by the time independence arrived, most cities in Black Africa had been built, and the inexperienced African governments started out with a ready-made, but unrecognized, urban problem. Few leaders appreciated the fact that their cities were poorly designed to meet the needs of their people. Some of these needs are simple and inexpensive dwellings arranged in patterns that fit the many-membered extended family; a transportation system relying primarily on bicycles rather than cars; land for garden plots where residents can grow some of their own food because buying food costs relatively much more in African cities than it does, for example, in the US.

Many-Sided Problems

Each year, the population influx continues and existing housing deteriorates, leaving Africa's cities with less housing for more people. The annual need has been estimated at about ten new dwellings per 1,000 inhabitants, yet even highly developed nations in the West build no more than six or seven dwellings per 1,000.

Kenya, one of the few African countries with a reasonably accurate census, estimated it needed roughly 86,000 new dwellings in 1962. By 1968, however, it had completed only 1,500 and had another 2,500 under construction. Moreover, the houses that were built cost US\$3,000-4,000, well beyond the means of 95 percent of Kenya's urban population. Even the Ivory Coast, rich by African standards, has not met the housing demand.

Housing is not a problem in the African countryside. But it becomes one the moment a person or family leaves the village or homestead for the city. In order to buy or rent a dwelling in the city, a person must have a continuing source of income, and this usually means a steady job. A job with a regular wage, however, is precisely



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what most of those who flock to the cities do not have and cannot get. Lacking alternatives, they resort to street sleeping, or become slum dwellers or squatters.

Efforts to build more housing are hampered by numerous problems. Financing is one of the most troublesome. The cheapest units yet built, either privately or through government programs,

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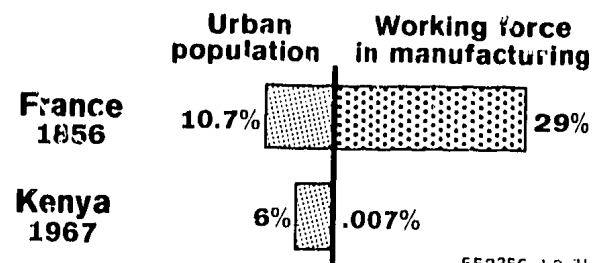
costs from US\$300 to \$400. This figure should be measured against the average yearly per capita income of below \$100 in most of Black Africa. Under present conditions, there is simply no easy way to bridge the gap. Private investors are reluctant to build because land costs are greatly inflated. Land registration is a new concept and determining ownership a difficult and time-consuming process. The financial mechanisms that permit Americans to buy homes easily do not exist in Black Africa where mortgages are virtually unprocurable.

There are still other problems. For example, no construction industry exists to build even simple urban housing. There are virtually no surveyors, architects, carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, or electricians.

Unemployment

Throughout most of the developed world, the growth of ever larger cities came in conjunction with industrialization. In the West, the factory system made large concentrations of people and services economically attractive, indeed irresistible. Cities came to be regarded as an essential adjunct of the new technology. While experts, not surprisingly, differ on the exact relation between urbanization and industrialization, there is no disagreement about which came first; not the large cities, but industrialization.

In Africa, it was the other way around. Cities came into existence far ahead of industrialization, insofar as it has come at all. In 19th century Europe, the urban population was invariably smaller than the working force engaged in manufacturing. In France in 1856, 10.7 percent of the population lived in urban areas, while 29 percent of the working force was employed in manufacturing. In Kenya in 1967, six percent of the population lived in cities, but only 0.007 percent of the labor force was engaged in manufacturing.



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Thus, there is an imbalance in an African city between the number of people residing there and the number it needs economically and can serve socially. Most residents do not have an occupation or a steady income. They subsist on odd jobs—shining shoes, guarding cars, running errands. They engage in simple barter, exchanging local brew for a bicycle part salvaged from a dump, or swapping a local foodstuff for cigarettes or an odd article of clothing. These activities ward off starvation but afford no confidence or security, develop no usable skills, and contribute nothing to economic growth. The imbalance is particularly difficult to deal with because it is a new and sudden development for African society—in traditional rural society, everyone had some work to do.

Cottage industries using simple machines do offer opportunities to the new urbanite but, in contrast to India, for example, there are few indigenous African entrepreneurs. Most new businesses and factories are started by foreign investors whose capital intensive and relatively large-scale methods are not geared to the African urban environment.

In the late 1960s, unemployed males averaged between 12 and 22 percent of the population in African cities, and the trend is upward. When the rate of unemployment rose abruptly in the early 1950s, its effects were blunted by the extended family, which provided for the welfare of its members. An individual in an extended family with ties to relatives spanning three or four

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generations is reasonably secure. Africans who moved to the city maintained ties with family members in the rural areas and also often had ties with relatives who had preceded them to the city.

Use for Idle Hands

This extended family system of social insurance is beginning to break down. There is thus the possibility that high unemployment, uncushioned by family-provided welfare, portends a spread in urban violence that will test the mettle of African governments.

For the long-term unemployed, the relationship between a benevolent host and his un-

psychologist who studied the problem in Brazzaville, Congo, concluded that the refusal of this third social milieu to be part of the social system and instead to form their own organization was an act of revolt. He decided there was a great risk that the latent feelings of revolt might well break out into acts of violence against anything convenient for any reason at all. There are similar situations in Kenya and Nigeria and probably elsewhere in Black Africa.

What is Being Done

African governments have tended to accept the cities they inherited. They feel too pressed by other concerns—developing the economy, increas-



Any material available from the rubbish dump goes together to make a squatter's home.

employed relative eventually tends to be reinterpreted by both parties in the light of economic circumstances and new social aspirations. There comes a time when an unemployed person exhausts the good will of his relatives and then moves in with friends. When he has exhausted his circle of friends, his situation becomes precarious. He finds himself in a third social milieu—that of other unemployed and abandoned men. Frustration replaces initiative, and the search for work is replaced by illicit activities. The process is not unique to Africa, but it has moved so rapidly there that criminal activity has already become a serious problem in a number of cities.

Traditional social systems may not be flexible enough to survive much longer. A French

ing education, reducing tribalism, and a host of political problems—to bother much about cities. They are hampered by conceptual hangups—e.g., they mistake an architectural frill for urban planning—they lack an organizational framework to attack the problems, even when recognized. In Nigeria, for example, some ten different government agencies make policy for the capital, Lagos. This multiplicity of agencies makes for the neglect of some important problems and for conflicts about others; the result, all too often, is administrative paralysis.

Many of the governments involved are poorly staffed, underfinanced, corrupt, and plagued with tribalism. These governments must struggle simply to maintain order amid a

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maelstrom of conflicting forces and are unlikely to focus on the cities until urban problems pose an immediate threat to political stability. Meanwhile, urban growth goes on apace, in haphazard fashion, increasing the frustrations of all city residents and hampering economic development by reducing efficiency.

Although no Black African government has really grasped the urban dilemma, some have begun to attack its symptoms. They have begun to clear slums, or crack down on crime, or return the unemployed to rural areas. At best, these are ineffectual remedies. At worst, they can be harmful and end by compounding the problem.

The Kenyan Government learned by experience that razing slums is a mistake, and it has stopped the practice, at least in Nairobi. Burning and bulldozing shanty settlements created much resentment in the city, yet sites that had been cleared were soon rebuilt with new shanties. At about the same time, at least two organizations—the University of Nairobi and the Christian Council of Kenya—were helping shanty dwellers improve their communities, with considerable success. The result was that the government was persuaded of the need to come to terms with the whole environment in which the squatter population lived. This change in viewpoint led to new policies that are slowly being implemented. With an acute housing shortage, money will go to build more housing rather than to destroy what housing there is. Squatters will be given security of tenure. Services will be provided to squatter settlements.

But crime is still a real problem in Nairobi. It got so bad that the government—mindful of the threat to the tourist industry—felt it had to pass legislation imposing a mandatory death sentence for armed robbery. In Kinshasa, Zaire, a crime

wave led President Mobutu to order a crackdown under a particularly brutal security officer. It is unlikely to succeed because the government, while worried about crime, is remarkably complacent about the poor housing and high unemployment that contribute so much to crime.

Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, among others, have made sporadic, small-scale attempts to return the un- and under-employed to the countryside. These attempts have not worked. In a few months, those hauled out went their way back because they have no land or place in the countryside. For example, in Mathere Valley, a Nairobi squatter settlement, it was found that 86 percent of the 30,000 residents had no land to which they might be returned. One answer would be a comprehensive system of movement permits, but strict enforcement probably would require more resources than most African governments could muster. Such permits would also be politically unpalatable.

The West is likely to be of little help. Not only are its urban problems different, but it has abundant resources and the advantage of having grown at a comparatively leisurely pace. The West has political stability, a large middle class, and an established legal framework. Attempts have been made to transfer in toto certain Western experience, but Africa cannot, for example, afford new towns or costly slum clearance.

If Black Africa's cities cannot offer some hope to the people who flood into them, they are in the end likely to become politically volatile. The cycle could run thus: too much migration; ineffective government response; rising crime and violence; finally, the emergence of a political rabble-rouser who can mobilize discontent to his own ends. At this point, the cities would become a real threat to government and social stability.

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